

UFCW calls out Multnomah County for purge of citizens committee

By Don McIntosh

Jeff Anderson, United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 secretary-treasurer, says he doesn't like bullies. That's why, at his urging, Local 555 staff turned out last year to oppose the purge of a little-known citizen volunteer committee at Multnomah County.

The 15-member Community Involvement Committee (CIC) was created by a ballot measure in 1984. The four-paragraph county charter amendment didn't go into detail about the committee except to say that it's supposed to facilitate direct communication between citizens and the board of commissioners at Multnomah County, and that it has the authority to hire and fire its own staff.

But last year, a 4-1 majority of the Multnomah County Commission turned that upside down — voting to give staff the authority to fire the committee.

The vote came after a months-long conflict between CIC staffperson Dani Bernstein and CIC members Greg Anderson and Yu Te. Greg Anderson — a former mayor of Florence, Oregon — is Jeff Anderson's older brother; Te is a community activist and past

president of the Hollywood Boosters Business Association. At an April 12, 2018, meeting of the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners, Bernstein asked commissioners to remove the two due to unspecified "behavior that does not align with Multnomah County values and expectations," and allegations that others had complained about them. But when then-commissioner Loretta Smith raised the objection that county code gave the Board no authority to remove members, the proposal was tabled.

CIC member Sherry Willmschen, a retired County employee, says it was horrendous that the Board considered allegations that impugned citizen volunteers' integrity without an investigation.

Multnomah County commissioners returned to the issue June 28 with a resolution to temporarily suspend the CIC, rescind the appointment of all CIC members, and set up a new CIC, which would no longer have the power to hire and fire its own staff. County Chair Deborah Kafoury said volunteer members were too argumentative, and that some felt "bullied." Greg Ander-

son countered at the meeting that it was *he* who'd been bullied — by staff. The resolution passed 4-1; Smith was the only "no" vote.

Jeff Anderson and Local 555 staff attended the commission meetings and opposed the purge. The union also put up online ads and sponsored an online petition to reinstate the CIC.

"There should be screaming from the mountains, but there's not," Jeff Anderson told the *Labor Press*. Anderson said he heard about the controversy from his brother, but got involved because it was the right thing to do. When no one else stepped up, he got Local 555 involved. Local 555 has a history of involvement in community affairs even when there's no direct tie-in to union issues, Anderson said. For example, UFCW has supported bond measure campaigns for housing, parks, and children's services, and opposed a ballot measure that would have privatized the Portland Water Bureau.

"We're part of the community," Anderson said.

Now, the dispute is likely to be resolved in court. On behalf of five of the ousted CIC members, public interest attorney

Dan Meek filed a lawsuit against the county Sept. 25, saying the Board of Commissioners lacked legal authority to suspend the CIC and fire all its members — and that doing so violated their freedom of speech and right to due process. Meek took on the case *pro bono* (without pay). The suit is pending, but the County continued to move ahead with its "re-set" of the CIC.

On Nov. 29, the Board of Commissioners held a hearing on an ordinance putting the county's Office of Community Involvement in charge of the CIC, and setting up a process for the Board or CIC director to remove CIC members. Again, Commissioner Smith was the only one to speak against it, calling it "unconscionable."

"The CIC was meant to be a watchdog," Smith said. "The CIC was not meant to be a tea party, and everybody get along."

The ordinance passed 4-1 on Dec. 13, Smith the lone "no."

Meanwhile, the county hired attorney Michael Tom — OHSU's Director of Affirmative Action & Equal Opportunity — to investigate allegations by County staff that several CIC

members broke County personnel rules that mandate a professional and respectful workplace free from discrimination and harassment. *Willamette Week* published a heavily redacted version of his 11-page report, dated Jan. 15. Among the alleged offenses: Greg Anderson tried to hug a staffperson and a CIC member, called women "girl," "sweetie" and "honey," and referred to Bernstein as "she" instead of "they" (Bernstein wants to be referred to as "they.") Tom found that some of what Anderson did was unprofessional and disrespectful, but couldn't determine if it was "severe or pervasive."

Greg Anderson agreed to be interviewed about the allegations by Tom, but told the *Labor Press* they were "trumped up poppycock."

"Its purpose was to obfuscate, to cloud the issue that somebody was taking over," he said.

Anderson and other members of the CIC have continued to meet "in exile," most recently March 2. A newly appointed CIC met for the first time on March 19.

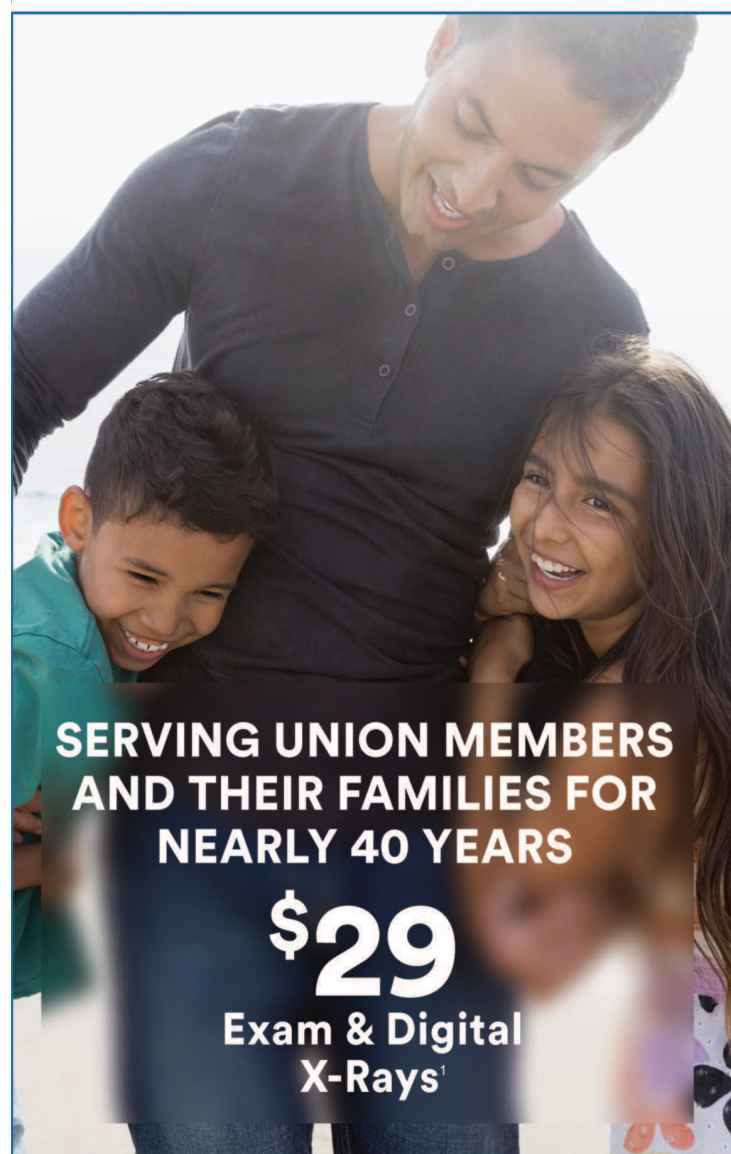
Attorneys for both sides in the dispute are preparing for trial.

Labor Council endorses TVF&R local option levy

At the request of Fire Fighters Local 1660, the Northwest Oregon Labor Council endorsed Measure 34-286, which will be on the ballot that will go out to voters in the Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue District for a May 21 election. Measure 34-286 renews a local option levy to maintain emergency response services and personnel hired since 2000. It maintains the existing levy rate of 45 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation for five more years. The current levy expires in June 2020. For an average property assessed at \$300,000, the cost of the local option levy would be about \$135 per year or about \$11.25 a month.

If the levy renewal fails, funding that pays for at least 92 of TVF&R's 432 firefighters and paramedics would be lost.

If it passes, levy funds will maintain firefighter, paramedic, and support staff positions. Levy funding will also be used to purchase land for future fire stations, firefighting tools, and medical equipment to ensure effective emergency response.



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